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THE SIX . . .
BEST CELLARS

HOLWORTHY HALL
HUGH KAHLER



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THE SIX BEST CELLARS





AS HE BLENDED HIS INGREDIENTS, HE WORE THE
COUNTERENANCE OF A MOROSE EMBALMER.

Harold Everett Porter
THE
SIX BEST CELLARS

BY

HOLWORTHY HALL

Author of "The Man Nobody Knew," etc.
AND
HUGH KAHLER

ILLUSTRATED BY
MAY WILSON PRESTON



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PREFACE

The Authors respectfully inform the public that "Oakmont" and all characters in this book are purely imaginary, and intentionally burlesqued.

Any one attempting to take the story seriously will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

THE AUTHORS



PART I



THE SIX BEST CELLARS

I

AS he entered the stream of commuters pinching into slow Indian file at the gates of the 5.15 Oakmont Local Express, Henry cramped his arm a little more possessively around his awkward brown-paper bundle and, at the same moment, yielded to the dual irritation of which this bundle was the focus.

Up to the end of the war, of course, you could carry home as many parcels as you liked, and even feel patriotic about it; but now that the war was over, and the shops continued to charge extra for suburban de-

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liveries, it was socially almost imperative to pay the charge. The present lapse from propriety, however, Henry might have minimized in view of the acute emergency. It was for dinner—dinner with important guests. Millicent hadn't telephoned him until nearly noon, and any married man who happened to see him on the train would understand.

But the second reason for his irritation was more profound. Thirty-eight dollars was what the burden had cost him, and thirty-eight dollars, at this stage of Henry's career, and for the purpose to which it had been consecrated, was serious. Indeed, if it hadn't been for Millicent's imperiousness, he would have said to the clerk who told him the price: "Keep it!"

As he entered the forward smoker, he was momentarily regretful that he hadn't elected, for once, to ride in a different car.

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He persuaded himself that he wasn't ashamed to explain what he was carrying — he just didn't want to; and when his first sweeping glance showed him no place in the forward smoker unoccupied, his heart bounded at the excuse for retreat. But before he could turn, he identified the highly-tailored back of Tommy Blair, sharing a seat with a monumental parallelopiped of brown paper. Henry wavered. If Blair could afford the luxury of carrying home his own wet goods, why, anybody could! And, as a matter of fact, there seemed to be really an astonishing number of packages in that car; there were neat, oblong packages, and round, lumpy ones; there were agglomerations of packages connected by intricate harness. Packages on the floor, in seats, in the overhead racks. Henry's own burden lightened suddenly by contrast. Then, as he smiled at A. Sturtevant Jordan, who was

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nodding amiably over a clump of bundles equipped with a wood-and-wire handle, Henry's mouth lost its downward slant.

“Getting off light, eh?” Jordan motioned toward Henry's modest armful. “Well, that's your percentage for being forehanded. I wish *I'd* had the sense to see this thing coming. Pay through the nose and cart it home yourself, now! Still, it's no time to think of prices, in *these* days.” He wagged his head mournfully. “Well, see you tonight,” he said.

Henry moved along the aisle. The multitude of parcels suddenly amused him; he realized that he wasn't alone in his misery. Even Jordan, the self-elected arbiter of Oakmont, was carrying his own freight without a quaver. But—“No time to think of prices!” Humph! If Jordan—like Henry—had been trying to get a living out of the bond business for the last

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three years he'd think of prices, fast enough!

Henry shifted his burden rather obtrusively as he found a vacant seat at the forward end of the car,— the fixed and undersized seat which, reversed, was ordinarily regarded as No Man's Land. The two men opposite were courteous enough, and tried to move their feet out of his way, but Henry was apologetic until he observed that neither of them had any luggage. His investment of thirty-eight dollars gave him an agreeable sense of superiority. The previous ignominy of carrying a heavy bundle, that ignominy which had all but dissolved when it was shared by Blair and Jordan, became almost a distinction now. Therefore Henry spoke with much more warmth than usual to McIvor Tiffany and Ed Hammond.

Secretly he had always balked at the fine nuances of Oakmont's social subdivisions.

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He hated to consider himself better—whatever that means—than big, noisy, good-natured McIvor Tiffany; and he honestly doubted that his own bond business made him more valuable to the community than Ed Hammond, with his chain of highly successful wholesale and retail groceries. Nevertheless, Henry was now pleasantly aware of a distinction, in his own mental processes, between the men opposite him and, say, Blair and Jordan. He knew that Jordan and Blair would draw exactly that same distinction between Henry and the pair he now confronted. Still more agreeably was he conscious of the line as Tiffany and Hammond would draw it. In the reserve with which they greeted his bland "*Good evening, gentlemen,*" he detected the slight but unmistakable hostility of the Out for the In—the unconscious tribute to his In-ness which they rendered

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as a result of endeavouring not to render any at all.

McIvor Tiffany rolled a jocular eye toward Henry's parcel. It was a wholly comprehensive, good-natured eye, and it was disconcerting.

"Tough luck, Carpenter," he said. "They're squeezing you shorts pretty hard, aren't they? Every time I go down Broadway I want to shake hands with myself and pin on another rose. I was the early, early bird, all right."

Henry's satisfaction waned abruptly. Something told him that Tiffany wasn't bluffing. Indeed, now that the conversation had begun and the subject was chosen, there was almost a hint of patronage on Tiffany's face. Henry forced a casual chuckle. He confirmed, because he felt that he had to, one of his earlier and most regrettable public exaggerations.

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“Oh, I’m pretty well stocked up, of course. Always have been, in fact. This is just some odds and ends I picked up at a club auction. Somebody had to have it and I thought it might as well be me.”

Tiffany nodded. He had caught the restraint in Henry’s voice and he wasn’t altogether deceived. There was a patent relish in his tone as he proceeded to recite his own possessions. It was evident that Tiffany cared little for the lighter, more exotic things, but what he had bought, he had bought in plenty. When spontaneous memory failed him he counted on his fingers. It was an avalanche of names which alone were fitted to command respect; but the arithmetic was numbing far beyond the power of the nomenclature.

Henry, restraining an impulse to glower, listened patiently to the end. His envy was chiefly financial; it was the same self-re-

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proachful feeling that he endured when people—people perhaps less deserving and certainly less suitable than himself—told him about huge commitments in Beth Steel, back in 1915. Tiffany wasn't compelled to limit himself to the needs of a month or a year—he was insured, provided only that he practised moderation, for at least a couple of decades.

Henry turned to Hammond with a half smile, as if in gentle depreciation. “ Sounds almost like one of your catalogs, doesn't it? ”

Hammond grinned. “ Well, it *ought* to. That's practically what it *is*. I guess if it hadn't been for me, he'd have been floundering like everybody else.” He glanced side-wise at Tiffany, the grin broadening. “ Mac certainly made an awful dent in what was left at the store, but he only got what I didn't need myself, at that.” He

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chuckled. "'Minds me of a line of poetry I've read somewhere: 'I wonder what the brewers buy that's half as precious as the stuff they sell'—or something like that. Well, we're not selling any of it, any more. There isn't any of it left to sell. But Mac and I don't have to worry; do we, Mac?'"

Henry's involuntary respect went, by prompt transfer, to Hammond. He had never really appraised the grocer—except as a grocer—until now. Of course, Hammond, like everybody else who could pay the dues, and a few who couldn't, belonged to the Country Club, and Henry had run into him at dances there, and sometimes on the golf course, but Ed Hammond, as man and brother, had been socially obscured behind Edward B. Hammond & Co., Fine Groceries, Wines, Liquors and Cigars, All Accounts Due and Payable on the First of

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Each Month. Henry recalled that Millie-
cent was less equivocal about it.

Now, as Henry visualized the loot of a certain department at one of Hammond's big, shining, spice-smelling stores, he exchanged for the Beth-Steel kind of envy the kind which, as a boy, he had directed toward the offspring of the local confectioner. Hammond was in the place of the confectioner, and Tiffany was pinch-hitting for the offspring. It was almost unfair. Instinctively, Henry glanced down the aisle to A. Sturtevant Jordan.

For the first time he found himself comparing Hammond and Jordan as specimens of the same race. It occurred to him that Hammond was outwardly as good a specimen as A. Sturtevant himself. There was nothing wrong with either his clothes or his speech; he had a pink, smooth, cheerful face, with many little lines of humour at the

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corners of his mouth, and his steady blue eyes were certainly more intelligent than Jordan's. And furthermore . . . The thirty-eight-dollar investment on Henry's knees began to seem very trivial.

Henry unbent by easy gradations while the train spurted smoothly through its cañon, between miles of wash-decorated fire-escapes. It was natural enough to chat affably over the initial topic, and, after that was exhausted, to keep on chatting about other things. Hammond revealed an unexpectedly mordant wit and fund of anecdote; Tiffany, who proved to be a masterly audience, laughed without restraint, and Henry, who laughed with and not at him, perceived that the attention of A. Sturtevant Jordan was fixed upon him from below brows perceptibly arched. He had a defiant impulse to scowl back. And, when they stopped at Oakmont, he went out of

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the forward door with Tiffany and Hammond, instead of deserting them for a word with his older friends.

He knew in advance that Milly wouldn't meet him. She hadn't said so, during their slightly heated telephone conversation, but it was obvious that she wouldn't dare to leave Olga to deal with dinner according to her simple, untrammelled Swedish fancies. Henry quickened his step as he discovered that it was raining slightly. There were never enough taxis to go round, in bad weather.

Tiffany's wife was waiting for her husband — a rather smart-looking little woman, too, thought Henry, as she lifted a cheerful hand from the wheel of a small sedan. He raised his hat, smiling with just one degree more geniality than the occasion warranted. Tiffany paused with one foot on the running-board.

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“What’s the matter, Carpenter? Isn’t your car here? Come on — jump in.”

Henry hesitated only a fraction of a second. It was cold; it was wet; the taxi, if he were lucky enough to get one, would cost fifty cents. The road to the Tiffanys’ house lay past his own. Blair and Jordan had already disappeared into the night.

“Why, that’s mighty nice of you,” he said.

“The idea!” protested Mrs. Tiffany. “Don’t make Mr. Carpenter stand there in the rain, McIvor — let him get in.”

Accordingly, Henry slid into the rear seat and folded his legs in order that Tiffany might scramble past him into the front cockpit. He heard, with approval, the Christian name of Tiffany’s wife, Hope. Charming name, thought Henry. Charming woman, he thought, again, as Hope Tiffany conversed with him while her hus-

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band drove. He distinctly liked her, on this improved acquaintance. A reference of Milly's to her seemed decidedly unjust. There wasn't the slightest reminiscence of a social climberess about this woman. Also, she had an inalienable dower right in the prodigious catalogue. Henry made himself very pleasant indeed. And McIvor Tiffany, warmed by the consciousness of benefaction to some one who mattered considerably in Oakmont, was increasingly pleased. As he helped Henry and the thirty-eight dollars' worth of potential hospitality out of the car he grinned, and unexpectedly offered to shake hands.

“Drop in, some time, Carpenter, and we'll take an inventory together.”

Henry had a curious belief that Mrs. Tiffany had momentarily suspended respiration.

“Thanks, I'll do that.” He sincerely

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meant it, for at rare intervals, even Henry had his intuitions. One of them whispered to him, as he slammed the door of the sedan after two reiterations of his gratitude, that the time had come to be ordinarily decent to McIvor Tiffany and his trim, pretty, utterly unobjectionable wife. Not that Henry had reasoned this out in cold blood. Not at all. It just came to him. Came in a flash — like that.

• • • • •

Millicent's voice came floating downstairs to meet him.

"Yes, I got it," he answered, a shade sulkily.

Her next question caught him halfway up the flight. "How much did it cost?"

Henry foresaw the tendency of the conversation as clearly as a bedevilled witness detects the trend of the cross-examination, but he had made an excellent rule about

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lying to Millicent. It was the result of experience. He told her, without embroidery, and she suspended judgment long enough to kiss him. The reprieve, however, was brief.

“Oh, dear! If you’d only gone down and got some things at Hammond’s when I wanted you to!” Millicent sighed heavily. “We might have bought bargains just as well as other people have, if you’d ever listened to me. Why, even last summer—”

“I know,” acknowledged Henry, wearily. “I guessed wrong. It looked silly to me to sink a lot of money when prices were twice normal. *I* couldn’t foresee that every trick congressman in the country was going to get religion at the same time. I thought things were going to get better, instead of worse. Lots of other people did, too. I’m not the *only* bad guesser, you know. Let’s forget it.”

He discovered, at that moment, that Mil-

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licent had remembered to put out his pearl studs. She hardly ever forgot anything, but now and then she did mislay his studs. It would have been a tactical diversion, just now, to be able to ask her, very gently, where they were.

“I don’t see what difference it makes, anyway,” he said, affecting great unconcern. “I’ve gone to lots of dinners where there wasn’t anything to drink, and so’s everybody else. I guess it wouldn’t have hurt the crowd to go without a cocktail, just for once, would it?”

Millicent confronted him. She was small and compact; to Henry she always suggested a woman carved out of a topaz or a fire-opal — a vivid creature, with a trick of glowing under animation.

“It wouldn’t hurt *them*,” she told him, with the intonation of one who deals with innocent stupidity. “It would hurt *us*.”

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“ Maybe I could live it down in time,” he objected, with humour which wasn’t as infectious as he had hoped. Millicent shook her head.

“ Why, don’t you *see-eee?*” She prolonged the vowel with telling emphasis. When *anybody* could have things to drink, it didn’t matter much whether we did or we didn’t. Nobody cared. And if you hadn’t tried to pretend to everybody, up at the Jordans’ dinner, that we *had* stocked up, it wouldn’t matter so much, even now.”

“ *Oh —*” Henry’s voice stopped, but Henry’s shoulders went on and said, “ Damn !”

“ I’m not blaming you, Henry. The way Sturtevant talked was simply maddening. But you *did* let everybody suppose we had a regular wine-cellar; you know you did. And I couldn’t come out and say you were fibbing, could I? And now everybody’s

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sure we've got a whole lot of things. We had to do this tonight, unless you were willing to come right out and admit . . . don't you see?"

Henry saw. Not that he had ever been really astigmatic; he merely liked to pretend that he could recall those unfounded vauntings of his at will. Pikers! The word was fascinating. It also suggested its blood-brother word — four-flusher. He made peace at once.

"All right, Milly. We've got to carry the thing through now, and we will, too. I'll get busy, the first thing tomorrow. There must be good bargains yet, if you know where to look for 'em. I'll ask Ed Hammond. We'll get enough to get by on, somehow. Hammond'll help me out; I know he will. You leave it to me."

Millicent's doubts yielded to treatment. She presently descended to guard the tem-

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peramental Olga during the final, delicate moments, and, half an hour later, Henry followed her. He arranged on the shelf of the butler's pantry his thirty-eight dollars' worth of ingredients and surveyed them, calculating. For twelve people he required fourteen cocktails; eleven for the first round (Daisy Jordan didn't like the taste) and three for the second. Henry, measuring out the gin, paused guiltily. H'm . . . conservation might be in order, about now . . . a *leetle* drop of water wouldn't do much harm. He dallied with temptation, resolved to fall, and fell hard. Chill 'em a trifle more than usual and you'd hardly know the difference. He tasted the mixture approvingly, and hurried into the living-room as the Blairs arrived, Tommy in his habitual state of exuberance, and his wife in her equally habitual state of deep-toned placidity.

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From the unescapable commonplaces which hosts exchange with first arrivals, they drifted helplessly to the burning topic of the period.

“I thought the question of the Army vote might hold this thing off for a few years, anyway,” observed Blair. “And I didn’t believe the legislatures would dare to slip it over on us. I’ve been pretty active ever since, but it’s about as economical as collecting old furniture. You certainly had a long head on you to get yours early, Henry. My hat’s off to you.”

“Leave it to Henry,” rumbled Mrs. Blair from beyond the synthetic-stone fireplace. “I’ve been reminding myself all day that he was the first one of us to admit how much he’s got.” To Henry, her laugh held a peculiarly ominous note. The memory of his braggadocio, and of the cost of today’s purchase, set him uneasy.

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“Hold on,” he objected. “You don’t want to get the idea that I’ve got a sort of champagne swimming-pool under the house. I didn’t mean to—”

Mrs. Blair’s deep merriment interrupted him. “Danger signals already? Cheer up, Henry, we’re not going to drink you out of house and home in *one* night. We’re reasonable.”

Others arrived; the Harrises and the Hol-sappels, the McAllisters, and, after just the right interval to be impressive, the A. Sturtevant Jordans. The party was complete. Millicent’s eyebrows fluttered. Henry, with a lingering twinge of conscience for the dilution, poured eleven cocktails into eleven glasses on the big tray. The rule was to help oneself, informally. Naturally, Henry waited till his guests were provided. His glance strayed from the tray. Then, as the hush descended, he

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reached toward the place where his own cocktail should have been. His fingers wandered and found nothing. He looked down. The tray was empty.

His first reaction was in response to the thought that he had miscounted the guests. Impossible! Then, as his eye travelled around the group, it came to a halt on Daisy Jordan in the act of lowering an empty glass. He was also in time to see an unmistakably medicinal grimace contort her face. She caught his expression of wonder, misinterpreted it, and shot back a compliment.

“Henry, you robbed the world of genius when you weren’t born a bar-tender. You make me think of that artist who said he mixed his paints with brains, you do, really.”

She approached, a soft, clinging woman who, at thirty-nine, manifested a firm faith

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in the appeal of all the qualities she thought, incorrectly, that she possessed. She cuddled toward him; Henry chose the word as he watched the action. Daisy could cuddle, he thought, at eight hundred yards' range. "One more for Daisy, please," she begged. "Just a weeny, teeny—"

Obediently, Henry tilted the shaker over her glass, but his eyes widened. "I thought you loathed 'em, Daisy."

She laughed. "I never did care for them so terribly much," she admitted, confidentially. "It must be an acquired taste — like olives and Roquefort. But Sturtevant says I'm *too* silly about it — so I'm taking lessons."

Henry understood. Daisy never cared terribly much about anything that was easy to get, but let it become reasonably scarce and she would have it or die. He wished

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that he had anticipated this. He might have given Daisy a special mixture of chilled orange-juice, and a dash of bitters. It would have tasted just as medicinal to her, and saved a cocktail. Henry's life-long habit of quick calculation—for he was one of those awe-inspiring individuals who can figure interest in their heads—acted mechanically, informing him that he had just poured nectar to the approximate value of twenty-six and a half cents past a palate no more capable than a drain of extracting value from it. The sum thus squandered was more than the gross commission on two baby bonds. He served A. Sturtevant with his second instalment and had to squeeze the shaker for Tommy Blair. Blair laughed.

“Why the sudden shortage, Henry?”

There was the faintest imaginable undertone in that speech. Henry felt it and

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chafed at it. Piker! Blair would think that Henry, popularly supposed to own a veritable cave, was niggardly to a matter of drops. While he was fumbling for a retort, Millicent surged loyally to the rescue.

“Yes, we *have* got to economize on the trimmings,” she said, with fine frankness. “We couldn’t afford to lay in a supply of *everything*, so we just naturally specialized. We’ll have to stop serving cocktails long before the rest of you do, but —” She paused. Henry, an Ananias, admiring his Sapphira’s invention while he kept an eye out for stray thunderbolts, felt the increased interest. Millicent laughed.

“Maybe you’ll think it’s plain extravagance, but Henry and I reasoned it out that everybody else would stock up on the hard things — and it’s natural enough, too, considering how much farther your money

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goes that way — but we wanted to be sort of original, you know. So Henry bought mostly wines. They don't go so far, of course, but after all —”

Tommy Blair exploded in confirmation.

“ She's right, by George, she's right! That's sure as shooting! Take a look over your horrid pasts. You don't have any very dramatic thoughts about some one highball you had last summer, do you? Or a Tom Collins on the club porch, after golf? Answer: you do not. You don't even remember whether you had one. But the time you got reckless at the Waldorf and blew your party to four quarts of Yellow Label, 1907 — oh, boy!”

There was a distinct hiatus as the idea mushroomed in eleven minds. Henry could actually see it expanding. His own brain, incorrigibly financial, was leaping at the mathematics of it. It was genius on

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Milly's part, all right, and Blair had clinched it for her, but . . . whew!

Then the hum and clatter enveloped Millicent and Henry with her. They drifted into the dining-room on the crest of it—the agreeable dining-room with its maximum capacity of twelve. There was a wine-glass at every place—even Daisy's. Always before she had turned it primly down, but tonight, as Henry's hypnotized attention fell upon it, it seemed to lift its face like a thirsty flower. A vertical line grooved its path between Henry's eyebrows. The glasses meant sauterne, of course . . . a final, prodigal splash with all the ultimate four bottles. Milly must have planned this all along . . . it was reckless, looking at it one way, and then, again, it might be the best thing that could have happened. It was pretty fair sauterne, too—the precious remnant of those

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days before the war. Yes, they could get by with it tonight. But . . . afterward?

Jordan's voice reached him, and Jordan's voice was complacent with the note in which Oakmont's inner circle spoke of the outsiders.

"Henry was press-agenting another haul in front of Hammond and McIvor, on the train out," he declared. "Tom Blair and I saw you, Henry. That's cruelty to children."

Henry, emerging from arithmetic, riposted sharply.

"They're all right," he asserted. "Ed Hammond's a perfectly good scout. He's a college man, and he was quoting poetry on the train this afternoon. I like him."

Conversation stopped. Everybody listened. Jordan chuckled. "Certainly. So do I. He's a good man in his place. None better. But Tiffany—"

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“Tiffany’s a little different, maybe,” conceded Henry. “But he’s—he’s a rough diamond just the same—a good, solid citizen. You people don’t know him as I do, that’s all.”

It was almost heresy. Henry could feel Millicent’s eyes rebuking him. He could see the displeased surprise in Jordan’s face. Jordan couldn’t bear to have any one disagree with him. Henry’s annoyance suddenly crystallized.

“It makes me tired—this idea that selling bonds or real estate or what not is so almighty exclusive, and selling groceries is degrading,” he said forcibly. “I like Ed Hammond and I don’t care who knows it.” He groped for support. “And let me tell you something—Ed Hammond’s got more stuff laid away than all the rest of us put together. Tiffany has, too. Hammond just cleaned out his stores and

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let his friends in on it when he had enough. If Milly's right, and the ability to give real dinners is going to be a social asset out here, you can take it from me that you're going to reckon with the Hammonds and the Tiffanys — you see if you don't."

It pleased him to observe the effect of his revelation. Hammond could have made a million dollars over night without impressing any of them. But a man who, while not an Insider, was still not positively aboriginal, and who had Ed Hammond's opportunities for warehousing — it was the same phenomenon as the candy-shop. Henry found converts among the men, with remarkable ease. Even A. Sturtevant Jordan acknowledged, after an argument, that to draw an impassable gulf around a personable owner of a chain of groceries wasn't sound democracy. Of course, if he had owned only one . . . and if he had

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stood behind the counter personally, . . . that would be very different.

Later, however, when they were locking up, Millicent had views of her own. "Don't you realize that you've made things infinitely worse, Henry?" she demanded. "You've put the thought into their heads that those awful people are possible! Don't you *see* there's no room for anybody else? There isn't a dining-room in Oakmont that'll hold more than twelve, comfortably. If the Hammonds get in, or the Tiffanys, somebody's got to go out to make room for them. And it might perfectly well be us — it *will* be us, as a matter of fact, if they ever find out we were just bluffing, and if they happen to think the Hammonds are just as nice as we are — which you said yourself! — and better entertainers!"

Henry protected himself stolidly. "If

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all they care about us is what we can give 'em to eat and drink, the sooner they drop us the better. I'm not running any road-house out here! I guess we can find friends enough. I never *did* think a whole lot of this sacred-six business, anyway. If it's getting to the point where it doesn't mean anything but the six best cellars, we don't belong to it, and that's a fact. Hammond and Tiffany are right at the top of *that* list. I don't want to talk about it any more. It makes me tired."

Nevertheless the conception of becoming one of the great majority instead of remaining one of the innermost six, was distinctly repellent to Henry. And he weakened under Millicent's swift attacks — attacks based on the optimism he had displayed when he first came home,— until he yielded unconditionally, with a promise to ransack the city tomorrow and to buy, regardless of

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cost, regardless of bargain, enough to justify their present rank in life.

•
The Blairs' dinner, during the next week, was wetter than any Blair dinner had ever been, and it apparently set a standard by which Oakmont dinners were to be judged. It wasn't that this dozen of suburbanites were entirely dependent upon stimulants for their congeniality, but that their eagerness to outwit a situation was aroused. Furthermore, it was evident that the world was to be divided, in a few brief weeks, into two main classes: those to be for ever obligated to their friends for little charities — and those to be never repaid. It wasn't the actual serving of an old-fashioned dinner which counted — it was the ability to serve it. And after the Blair dinner, people began to like to produce evidence.

Scouting desperately, Henry picked up

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occasional odd lots of light wine at prices which ate acidly into his soul. Eight bottles of Pontet Canet was the supreme sacrifice. He couldn't replenish, except at hideous expense, his supply of cocktail material, so that he relied upon Millicent's diplomacy, and didn't replenish it. But the future held no cheer. Inevitably he would be exposed. Henry suffered, and bought two dozen domestic champagne at a price which finally settled the question of trading in the old car. But his soul revolted at the cost of the genuine French luxury, and Millicent finally released him from his promise.

“We can make champagne cup,” she said, loyally, “and nobody’ll ever suspect. So don’t do anything more about it till I tell you to.”

Henry dropped in at McIvor Tiffany’s on several occasions and wasn’t uplifted by the

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prosperity he found there. He observed, not without misgivings, that Tiffany played golf with Clarence Holsappel on Saturday afternoon, and that sometimes on the 5.15 from New York, Tommy Blair marched past the vacant seat at Henry's elbow in order to choose the one beside Ed Hammond.

From Millicent he learned that a similar movement was under way on the feminine side. She herself had discovered that Hope Tiffany was awfully nice, and had asked her to tea; at Mrs. Jordan's she had been made acquainted with Mrs. Ed Hammond, a quiet, grave-eyed little woman who seemed to be watching something with deep interest.

Millicent's inspiration at their own dinner had been fortunate in one unexpected way. In naming wine as the Carpenter specialty she had unintentionally made it

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possible to avoid exposure except through large and stately affairs. She had led up to a natural failure to provide for informal occasions. It was all right for the Carpenters to serve mint lemonade after bridge, or they could open bottles of Hoppo instead of producing a siphon and Scotch. Everything would be understood and every one content. Millicent pointed out the advantages of this situation, and Henry, agreeing with her as to the present, still continued to brood gloomily upon the day of reckoning.

The half-dozen families which Henry had dubbed "the sacred six" still held together, but it was clear even to Henry's masculine perceptions that the linking, which for the past year had been growing looser, was now feebler every day. He approved, dubiously, of Millicent's developing strategics. She was taking up both the Tiffanys and the

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Hammonds, not too pointedly, to be sure, but unmistakably. The Carpenters played bridge at the Hammonds', and the Hammonds returned the visit a few evenings later; Millicent finally went so far as to have the Tiffanys for a very informal little dinner at which fully a third of the true, Gallic claret was daringly poured. McIvor Tiffany, perceiving that his own method had been perhaps too narrow, chaffered in regard to a possible trade. He wasn't so much interested in the claret, he said, but he might be willing to swap for a few bottles of champagne, and, at a pinch, he'd even consider the Pontet Canet. Henry was groggy, but Millicent came to the fore and gently rejected the proposition.

“We'd love to,” she said regretfully, “but we can't. We made up our minds to be specialists and we've got to stick to it. Of course *I* don't care much one way or the

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other, but Henry —” Here she gave Henry the high sign, and in spite of himself he had to confirm her policies. The strange thing about it was that Tiffany acted as though he liked Henry better after the refusal.

The frontiers of Oakmont, although wabbling, stood unchanged. The six remained the six, and the outsiders stayed outside, but changes appeared in the situation. The Tiffanys and Hammonds, for example, stood out as leaders of a new group which capitalized its resources, held dinners and dances at the Country Club, and conducted itself generally as though it had ceased to realize its position. There was a vague challenge in this behaviour. Exclusiveness fails of its purpose when those who are excluded ignore the fact. It required an appreciable effort on Mrs. Carpenter's part to maintain her sweetness toward Hope Tiffany.

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The McAllisters, whose dinner to the six followed close on the barbaric splendours of the last outsiders' party at the Country Club, unwisely decided on competition. They cut deeply into their reserves, and Henry awoke, the next morning, with a disillusioning reminiscence of undergraduate days.

"Enough's enough," said Henry to himself, on the way to town, "and too much is plenty. I'm out of my class. For two cents I'd cut the whole thing and join the W. C. T. U.—hanged if I wouldn't. And I wouldn't be so darned lonesome, either."

For already the austere element, which had always held itself aloof from the effervescence of both insiders and outsiders, was voicing an audible disapproval of the momentum which Oakmont's relaxations were gathering; and to the cohorts of the austere

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had flocked a number of those who, neither In, nor Out, nor In-Between, had preached and practised moderation in the days of bounty.

It was schedule time for the Carpenters to give another dinner to the Six. Their unwritten traditions were sacredly obligatory, and now more than ever. Five times the Carpenters had drunk deep of other people's hospitality; it was essential to balance the account. The schedule was adamant, and the guests were confident that Henry would prove a superlative host. A. Sturtevant Jordan emitted ponderous jests with reference to vintages of unspeakable rarity; others of the circle said less but looked as much or more, and Henry speculated on the trials of Judgment Day.

Millicent, in planning the campaign, suddenly became unreconciled to the absence of cocktails.

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“But, my dear!” protested Henry weakly. “We’ve gone over this thing time and time again, and right from the beginning you *said* —”

“Oh, *that!*” responded Millicent. “That was before I thought. I’ve changed my mind.”

“Thank the Lord you can’t change mine!” said Henry. “What’s made you think we need cocktails?”

“Because people will need something or they’ll *guess*. I don’t know how I missed that, Henry. They’ll eat canned soup without a quiver if they’ve had something beforehand — nobody thinks much about eating at a dinner — but if they have to wait until the roast and then only get a stingy glass or two of real claret or American champagne —”

“Very well, then.” Henry reddened. “If they don’t like it they know where they

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can go. I tell you one thing, Milly: they won't get any three-dollar cocktails here. Vermouth's up to twenty-eight dollars a quart right now. Never again! Besides, I thought you said we'd make champagne cup."

"We can't," said Millicent simply. "It isn't done. I didn't know it until yesterday. I mentioned it — just to find out — and they say it's plebeian. You'll have to get something real."

"I will — *not*," said Henry firmly.

"Then we'll give 'em just what we've got and have it over with," she returned, with equal firmness.

He came home, the following night, to find a note from Miss Virginia Jasper awaiting him. Millicent flicked it toward him carelessly. She had been using it, unopened, as a book-mark, and she was a quarter of an inch deep in the story before

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he had torn the end of the prim, stiff envelope, inscribed in the prim, stiff script.

Henry liked the old lady, quite aside from the fact that she was some shadowy kin of his mother's. It was comfortable to drop back into the eighties by sitting in one of Miss Jasper's plush chairs, his feet profaning an unfaded, cabbage-size rose of the Brussels carpet, his eyes soothed by antimacassars, wax-fruit displays below glass bells, crayon enlargements surrounded by elaborate gilt frames, the iron fire-place in the white marble hearth, the Rogers group, the prisms dangling from the gasolier which sprouted downward from a plaster rosette in the ceiling. And Miss Jasper, magnificently untouched by time — Victorian even unto her abhorrence for telephone and electric lights — fitted perfectly into this background; a plump, rosy, placid old maid of the type which makes of spinsterhood a

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profession as exacting and definite as that of the Vestal Virgin herself.

Naturally, since she was now in process of recovery from influenza, and on principle estopped from telephoning Henry, she wrote him :

My dear Henry:

I write you in much Distress. There is no one else to whom I may turn for Advice and Assistance in a Matter with which I cannot cope unaided. Will you come to see me on Thursday Evening if possible? I am sorry to trouble you, but I am sure that I may always count upon your Sympathy and Understanding.

Affectionately yours,
VIRGINIA JASPER.

Henry tossed the note to Millicent without comment. She glanced through it, and laughed.

“ How stupid for you, Henry. She’s a dear old thing, but I know her like a book.

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All she wants is to talk to somebody about how ungrateful the Dorcas Society is, or whatever it is she spends her time over, and you're the only man she knows. I'm awfully sorry. It'll take your whole evening."

"She's all right," defended Henry, stoutly. "She's one person that would stick to us through thick and then. I couldn't say that about all *your* acquaintances — or mine either. They don't make friends like her, nowadays."

Millicent laughed again. "You'd better not tell her you've just paid your bill of a hundred and sixty dollars for Onondaga County champagne, then. I don't know whether she'd stick to you, after that, or not. . . . That reminds me. They say she's holding up the arms of old Mrs. Teak, just now. They're organizing some kind of a law-enforcement league to snoop into people's ice-boxes when the law takes effect."

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Henry snorted. "Ours will be plenty sanitary by *that* time, all right."

He drove his little tin-plated runabout up the hill, after dinner, to the prim, trim little house where Miss Jasper had rooted as irremovably as a tree, long before Oakmont came into being. A gaunt, vinegar-mouthed tire-woman admitted him; he found Miss Jasper knitting, her feet on a carpet-covered hassock, her face set in grim, grave lines. She approached her revelations indirectly, and, accustomed to her processes, he made no effort to hurry her. After he had listened for half an hour she dropped her needles and faced him resolutely.

"Henry, I sent for you because I'm in a bad fix. I want you to get me out of it. You can."

Miss Jasper's speech had no resemblance to her letters. She had been educated in a day in which it was held impossibly un-

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couth to use vulgar diction in correspondence and there had been a promise of a Chinese difference between the written and spoken English idiom.

“I’ll try,” said Henry. “What is it?”

Miss Jasper’s colour deepened by two shades. “It’s Charles,” she declared, warmly. “My half-brother.”

Henry waited patiently. He remembered Charles, the half-brother. A furtive person, Charles, who had lived at Miss Jasper’s house for eight or nine years, professed the highest degree of asceticism, read de Quincy for pleasure, let himself be known to hardly a soul in Oakmont, and died unobtrusively a few years ago.

“You know that I’ve always been opposed to liquor,” she went on, presently. “I’ve belonged to the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union ever since it was started, and I belong to the Anti-Saloon League and

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the Law and Order Society and several others. Everybody knows it. It's one of my convictions. And I'm invited to be an Honorary Vice-President of the Law Enforcement League Mrs. Teak is organizing. I'm supposed to be one of the oldest prohibitionists in the county." Her voice rose. "And here I find, all of a sudden, that I've got my cellar half full of *rum*!"

Henry sat very still, trying to surround the intelligence.

"Rum?" he managed to echo, dully.

"Yes—wine or beer or whiskey or something like that. Boxes and boxes of it! Under my roof for fifteen years and I never dreamed of it! I mean, I knew he had it, but I didn't know what it *was*. Charles brought it with him when he came to live with me in 1904. He said it was mineral water he had to take for his rheumatism. He always carried it with him

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wherever he went. I never saw him drink any of it. And after he died it just stayed there. It was in a closet we hardly ever look at. I'd forgotten all about it until Susan and I were moving some old furniture this morning and came across it. There was one box that had been opened. I found one bottle of this—this liquor in it. I—I don't know what it is, but I'm perfectly sure it isn't mineral water. Come and look at it, Henry."

She unlocked the sideboard in the dining-room and stealthily produced a bottle, a dark, long-necked, dust-covered bottle which sent a thrill down Henry's spine. He took it almost reverently.

Johannisberger Bewern Auslese—1878.

Generally speaking, Henry was no connoisseur. He belonged to that great American public which finds a blissful pleasure in, say, Yellow Label, 1907, be-

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cause it is thoroughly convinced that it ought to, and because it has the testimony of the marginal figures in the wine-card to confirm the theory. But he happened to know that *Bewern Auslese* of 1878 was a wine for which a true connoisseur would commit any crime in the calendar, a vintage practically exhausted long before the war, a thing above and beyond price, splendid, majestic, unique.

“Is it—intoxicating?” Miss Jasper whispered the question in the tone of one who still harbours a faint hope. Henry nodded.

“Yes,” he said thickly. “It’s wine—I—I think it’s what they call Rhine wine.”

Miss Jasper sniffed. “M’ff! German, too!” Plainly its Teutonic associations added to its sinfulness.

“How much of it did you say you had?”

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he asked, setting the bottle reverently back on the sideboard.

“I didn’t count,” said Miss Jasper. “But there must be seven or eight big boxes of it—all just alike and all marked with the—the Johnny Burger name like the one on this bottle. When I think of how Charles deceived me—” She compressed her lips. “He knew perfectly how I felt about liquor. The *idea* of filling up my house with that nasty stuff—and pretending it was . . . Ugh!” She shuddered.

“Yes. He shouldn’t have done that.” Henry was slowly recovering from the shock. Seven or eight cases of 1878 Johannisberger! Seven or eight cases . . . sev— He forced himself to a timid question, doing valiant battle against a screaming conscience.

“I suppose you want me to—sell it for you,” he said, hesitantly.

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“Sell it? *I?*” Miss Jasper stared at him. “Do you imagine for a moment that *I’d* be a party to throwing that poison out before innocent people? Do you think *I’d* help to — to spread the curse of rum among my neighbours? Why, Henry! Any one of those bottles might be the means of giving some fine young man an *appetite* for it! Think of it! Suppose I should be responsible for starting some other woman’s son or husband on a . . .”

“I see,” said Henry, stupidly. “Yes, Aunt Virginia, that *would* be awful — especially now that it’s so hard to get.” He bit his lip savagely.

Miss Jasper, who hadn’t caught the last of the sentence, shook her head. “No,” she said. “No! Not a drop of that wretched stuff shall ever pass human lips if I can help it. And I can! That’s why I sent for you, Henry. I couldn’t do it my-

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self, and I don't trust Michael. He cuts grass for half a dozen families on the hill, and Susan says his tongue's longer than any living woman's. He'd tell *everybody* that I'd had a cellar full of rum for years." She shuddered again. "I *know* he would. Just think of it. There's nobody but you, Henry. I know I can trust *you* not to tell."

"I won't," said Henry, shakily. "Of course I won't. Hardly! But—but what do you want me to do with it, if you won't sell it and don't want to keep it?"

Miss Jasper grasped the bottle firmly by its convenient neck. Her face assumed the sacrificial expression of the zealot about to do justice on a heretic.

"I want you to cart every one of those boxes away somewhere," she whispered, "into the woods—*now*—and smash every single bottle into a thousand pieces!"

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She punctuated the climax by bringing down the bottle on the marble slab of the sideboard. There was a musical tinkling of splintering glass, a whimper of flowing liquid. A glorious, ineffable bouquet impregnated the chaste atmosphere.

“I’ll do it!” said Henry, resolutely. “I’ll do it now. This minute. I’ll take two cases right with me, and come back for the rest. Trust me, Aunt Virginia. I’ll help you!”

“And you’ll never tell anybody — not even Millicent?”

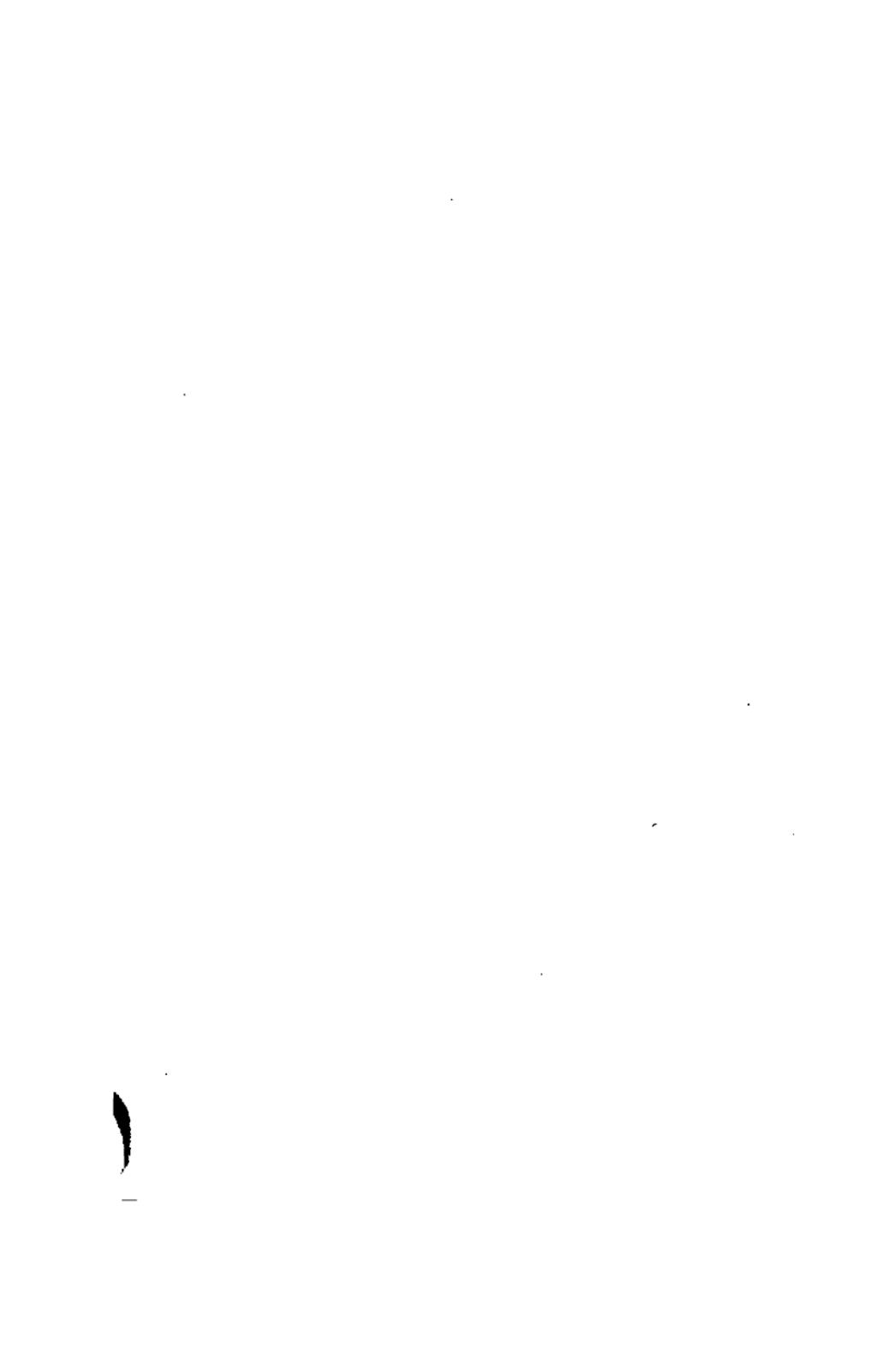
“Well, not unless she finds it out,” swore Henry.

“Of course,” said Miss Jasper, with tears starting in her eyes, “I loved Charles, but —”

“So did I,” said Henry, with bottomless sympathy.



PART II



II

NOTHING so modern as electricity had forced an entrance into Miss Jasper's maidenly house. She gave Henry a tallow candle which, as it diluted the cellar darkness to a weak solution of visibility, he found well suited to the dramatic quality of the proceedings.

Miss Jasper, glued to the head of the stairway by her conviction that rats are more formidable by night than by day, guided him, vocally, to a bosky compartment beyond the furnace. The compartment was divided by a rough partition into two cell-like halves, where retired chairs, superannuated bedsteads, and a vast complement of miscellaneous litter had lain quietly for years until its recent inspec-

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tion, with a view to bestowal upon the Salvation Army. In one of the cells, which evidently had received priority in the overhauling, everything had been religiously cleared from the vicinity of the Scourge. The stencilling on the double pile of cases which stood against the masonry was breathlessly distinct. Henry stood in rapt contemplation until a drop of hot tallow on his wrist waked him to action.

One of the topmost cases, its cover lifted, was fitted with thin shrouds of straw. Henry nodded, as Sherlock Holmes would have nodded. This was the case in which Miss Jasper had found the single clue to the horrific secret. Careless of his shirt-front—for this was no time to delay, or to balk at trifles—he gathered it to his bosom, and steered a cautious course with it back to the stairs.

Again and again he made the pilgrimage,

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clutching each of the heavier boxes to him in a death-grip, until all eight cases, seven of them gloriously burdensome, reposed in the covering darkness of Miss Jasper's side porch.

She reproached herself for his ruined linen and his damaged dinner-coat. Secure in the contrast between a three-dollar shirt and a fifty-dollar jacket, and seven cases of Johannisberger, 1878, he made light of the damage. Measured in mere dollars the comparison was ludicrous. Measured by the new, elusive standard of exclusiveness, it became startling. But he concealed his emotions.

He dared not load the tiny car with more than two cases at a time, and he drove down the long hill more cautiously than if he had been ferrying a patient with a broken leg. When he arrived at his own house, he found Millicent waiting for him.

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“There’s a long-distance call for you,” she announced. “I thought you were going to stay up there all night . . . What on earth’s *that?* and *what’s* happened to your clothes, Henry?”

Henry indulged in the wild laughter that clamoured for escape. Before he had recovered, her quick eyesight had relieved him of his oath. Therefore he set the situation before her in all its bald comedy, saw its immensity dawn on her intelligence, and drove back for the second trip. By a quarter of eleven o’clock the trucking was completed, and both the Carpenters were radiantly speechless with relief. So was Miss Jasper.

There was a lock on the fruit-cellar door, a cheap, rickety affair not wholly impervious even to a hairpin. Henry became aware of its futility as he closed the door; so that he brought out the stout chain and

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padlock he had used to protect spare tires, and affixed them to the flimsy partition with clinched staples. Not until then, his face fixed in a grin which almost ached, did he reward the agonized endeavours of the toll-operator.

Ordinarily, the news which came over the wire from Chicago would have flattened him. His partner's panic, caused by the fact that the Western bank which had all but agreed to take over a certain vital issue, had suddenly decided not to touch it, ought to have carried consternation to Henry's soul.

But he listened almost contemptuously to his partner's story of defeat. The soothing consciousness of seven cases of *Bewern Auslese* 1878 under padlock in his cellar,—seven cases free, duty free, tax free, everything free—made him magnificently immune to the vagaries of provincial bankers.

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“Yes . . . yes . . . yes, I get that all right . . . Oh, ridiculous! I *said*—tommyrot. *No*—*tommyrot!* Don’t get so fussed about it. If you can’t swing it, I’ll come out and see to it myself. Keep your shirt on. I *said* . . . Oh, never mind. **NOTHING!** Forget it. I’ll take the one o’clock tonight, and be with you day after tomorrow. Jolly ’em along till then. Don’t worry. I’ll handle it myself. Good-bye.”

He heard his partner gasp, and it amused him, loftily. Henry’s inability to handle the outside end of their business was an admitted fact. That he should conquer where his partner had failed—and in the West at that—was sheer presumption. And yet, even while he wound up the interview with bluff assurance, Henry knew that he was going to succeed. “I’ve got to get

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the 11.56 to New York and go on to Chicago tonight," he said crisply to Millicent.

He impressed her as emergency valet, changing his clothes while she packed his bag with at least twice the linen he would require.

"Don't whisper a syllable about the Johannisberger to a soul. Of course Aunt Virginia can't say anything, even if she finds out, but she'd never forgive me . . . I feel sort of mean about it, too, but my Lord! Throw it *away*? . . . It won't hurt her if she doesn't know about it . . . My dear child, there isn't another wine fit to be mentioned with it . . . Champagne's *vulgar* by the side of it. I don't believe there's any bigger accumulation of it anywhere, except maybe in some of those old German castles . . . Whatever you do, *don't* try to open a case of it — you might

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smash it — and keep that Swede out of the cellar on your life."

Millie, although her untutored standards still clung to the allure of bubbles and sparkle, was impressed. She mentioned the coming dinner, speculatively. Henry was sentient of an unfamiliar deference in her tone.

"I'll get back in plenty of time for that. All I've got to do is to see a couple of bankers and tell 'em what's what. Take me a day, maybe. Two at the outside. Go right ahead with the party. And, oh! Don't forget this. Get hold of Mrs. Tiffany. You remember they wanted to swap? Let 'em have all the rest of the claret, and get enough things back so we can have some cocktails, too. *This* time we'll have a showdown!"

He caught the Chicago express at one

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o'clock, outfaced a Pullman conductor who averred an utter lack of lowers, and slept soundly. Even the next day's tedium didn't weaken him; he contemplated the coming battle with the bankers quite unconcernedly. His partner, a victim of outspoken depression, marvelled at the change in Henry when he met him at the station. His partner marvelled still more during the evening session. When they went to bed it would have been difficult to determine which one of them had the greater confidence in Henry.

The battle lasted two days instead of one, but Henry wasn't to be denied. He swung aboard his train an altered man, a ruler of lesser men, followed by his partner's profane congratulations. Henry was self-deprecatory, but not in the manner of a hypocrite. Banking matters, now that they

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were settled, meant nothing to him. His ambitions were waiting for him at home. Piker? Just like Napoleon.

He had said that he would return in time for the dinner of atonement, and he did, but it was a narrow squeak. He reached New York barely in time to catch the 5.40, which deposited him at the Oakmont station at 6.19. It was half-past six before he sprang from the tin taxicab, took his front steps three at a stride, and burst into his front hall, with the dinner guests due in an hour.

Millicent, almost dressed, was in a state of high excitement. Her kiss to him was electric. The news of his trip barely reached her consciousness. He saw that she had something more than the usual weight of her dinner duties, something more than the glory of regeneration, on her mind.

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“I—I don’t know whether you’ll like it or not, Henry, but I’ve gone and done it, this time!” She paused, breathless. “The Hammonds are coming. And the Tiffanys, too.” She watched him earnestly.

Henry took it without a qualm. “Good for you! I like Ed Hammond — educated chap. Knows poetry. And I always said McIvor Tiffany’s a rough diamond. He —”

Millicent snatched a deep breath. “You don’t understand. There’s only room for twelve, and — and so I had to leave out the Holsappels and the Harrises.”

Henry scowled a little. “They’ll be mighty sore,” he said thoughtfully. “Still, there’s no law compelling us to ask ‘em to every dinner we give, even if it always has been a give and take —”

“I told you long ago that we’ve got to reckon with the Hammonds and the Tiffanys,” said Millicent. “If we don’t take

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them in, somebody else will. People are beginning to flock around them, even now. It's pretty nearly a question of having a real opposition, or of taking the opposition leaders into our own set and going on as we are. I schemed and schemed to find a way to seat sixteen, but I couldn't. Nor even fourteen. So — And I'm not the only one who's thought it out, either. I know the signs."

"I don't care, if you don't," said Henry, unlacing his shoes. "I like Ed Hammond better than Holsappel, any day."

She left him, and went down to labour with Olga while he dressed. Presently her voice climbed to remind him of the unmixed cocktails and the unopened cases of Jahnisberger. Henry hurried down. A surprising array of bottles greeted him as he passed through the butler's pantry. He smiled. Milly had evidently traded with

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Tiffany as he had counselled. He found a hammer and screw driver, switched on the cellar light and descended blithely.

Then followed a surcharged interval during which the cheery squawk of yielding nails came agreeably to Milly's ear. Then a dynamic silence . . . again the squawk . . . once more silence . . . then a spattering glass-crash and the voice of Henry lifted in potent speech. Millicent ran to the head of the stairs.

“Henry! Oh — Henry! *Henry!* Don't tell me you've broken a bottle!”

There was a strained pause.

“Come down here, Milly!” So he would have invited her to view the evidence of a hasty murder. Millicent crept carefully down the stairs, holding her skirts aloof. Henry, hammer in hand, stood in the centre of a semi-circle of opened cases, from each of which sprouted a pyramid of conical

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straw jackets. About him, upright on the floor, stood an army of brownish bottles. On his face, in the glow of the single ceiling-bulb, was the look of a man face to face with stark ruin. In his left hand he gripped the bodyless neck of a shattered bottle.

“Wh-what is it, Henry?” Her voice was hushed as in the presence of madness.

He swept the hammer in a futile gesture of despair. His lips moved without sound. She crept closer.

“Empty!” That was the word he was trying to say, “Empty!”

She stared from bottle to bottle. One by one they revealed themselves to her for the hollow shams they were, corkless, void.

They gazed at each other above the tragedy. Henry’s brain fumbled its way to the simple truth, an illuminating vision of Miss

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Jasper's furtive half-brother, quietly emptying bottle after bottle and returning it to its straw jacket and its wooden case, because he didn't know how else to dispose of them unobserved. He had died before the junkman could immure his secret. Henry groaned. Millicent, watching him, saw that his new assertiveness had oozed away from him. He was trying to tell himself that, in his haste and excitement, the difference between the weight of a crate of empty bottles and of a crate of full bottles would naturally have escaped him — but it was cold comfort. Millicent's old command came back to her.

“It's no good standing here swearing, Henry. Come upstairs and mix the cocktails. We've only got twenty minutes.”

“What's the use?” Henry was paralysed. “We can't bluff it out this time.”

“You come upstairs and mix those cock-

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tails," repeated Millicent imperatively. "I'm not through yet! We've got two bottles of American champagne left, and we can mix it with Bubble-Up. It'll go round, and they'll never know the difference. Come on!"

Henry laughed funereally. "It might . . . it might do for *women* — but Ed Hammond? Why, he knows vintages blindfolded! And Tiffany, too! And Jordan. You couldn't fool those fellows in a thousand years."

Millicent shook him firmly by the sleeve. "Come on and mix the cocktails," she said again. "Do as I tell you. Mix three rounds! *Strong* ones. If anybody can tell what vintage he's drinking after he's had two or three cocktails, well, he's just bomb-proof, that's all. Come on, Henry dear. Please!"

Henry came to heel. Doggedly, he slunk

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to the butler's pantry, where, as he blended his ingredients, he wore the countenance of a morose embalmer. When the mixing was accomplished, he surrounded the two lone bottles of domestic champagne with hurriedly cracked ice, and laid beside them several pints of the aerated cider destined to serve as diluent. How the adulteration was to be managed, he didn't know. Milly would have to fix it, somehow. It didn't matter much. They were bound to be caught. But if Milly wanted to flirt with fire once more — let her!

He found it difficult to greet his guests properly, but the stirring example of Millie, undaunted under misfortune, enabled him to counterfeit pleasure with fair success. Milly's semblance of serenity found a feebler reflection in his own attitude, inward and outer. He passed over the awkward moment when A. Sturtevant Jordan,

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with a touch of acidity in his tone, demanded to know what detained the Hollsappels, whose non-arrival presented itself to his clouded vision as an attempt to trespass on the Jordan privilege of the stellar entrance. He endured without a hint of emotion the hearty slap on the shoulder with which McIvor Tiffany made himself welcome. He caught Milly's signal and introduced the tray. On it were both of the small shakers and the double shaker besides.

"Plenty for everybody, tonight," announced Henry, in false joviality. His eye strayed malevolently toward Daisy Jordan. Henry prided himself on mixing a workmanlike cocktail and he had an artist's resentment toward the philistine consumer.

They helped themselves gaily. Henry also drank, with a sign of satisfaction.

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After a decent pause, he refilled glasses, with an inward groan over Daisy's, coyly proffered, reluctantly sipped. But Hammond shook his head, showing a glass barely tasted.

"Never neutralize my palate with these things when I want to enjoy wine," he said pleasantly. "Thank you just as much, but I'd rather not."

Henry's jaw dropped. Hammond, his connoisseurdom impaired by two or three cocktails, perhaps even one, wasn't so dangerous. Hammond, his faculties alert, was beyond even Millicent's genius.

"Oh, come on," urged Henry weakly. "It's a shame to waste it."

A soprano giggle answered and Daisy's glass swam appealingly into his ken. "Never mind, Henry — it won't be wasted — not a weeny, teeny drop. I'll see to that."

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Henry filled the glass apathetically. He watched her drink it, wondering if she understood its power. He tried to edge close to Milly, to draw her notice to the catastrophic self-denial of Ed Hammond, but she eluded him so effortlessly that he knew, from experience, that she didn't intend to allow him private speech.

Again he offered to fill glasses from the last of the shakers. No one else — absolutely no one — seemed to care for a third round. Henry steeled himself for the inevitable. With the beginnings of awe, he saw Daisy Jordan take her final sip. If the others had only accepted her as a leader. He watched her, fascinated. Her lip didn't even quiver. He thought helplessly of his own efforts to learn to like Roquefort cheese.

Daisy sat at his right, and he was grateful, as he absorbed his soup, that she wasn't in any mood for conversation. She ate de-

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liberately, her little finger extended with determined rigidity from her right hand, a faint, reminiscent smile on her lips. Henry couldn't tear his thoughts from Hammond; Hammond undrugged and eagerly percipient; Hammond, the connoisseur; Hammond, the professional . . . about to revel upon domestic champagne and Bubble-Up.

* The roast was on the table. The maid appeared with a bottle, collared with one of Milly's best napkins. He could see the little ripple of anticipation. He tried, piteously, to catch Milly's eye, but she wouldn't look at him. Hypnotized, he watched the maid cross the space from the pantry door. Then, in a high, clear, carrying voice, Daisy Jordan shattered the tension.

“I'm going to tell you all the funniest thing,” she announced brightly. “I've

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to Daisy. But, at last they were back again in their places, avoiding each other's eyes, trying to construct the correct behaviour for dinner-guests who have just watched one of their number slide — metaphorically — under the table. The maid again approached Milly with immense solemnity.

“ Will I pour the wine, now, ma'am? ”

Her aspirated whisper carried to every ear. Henry had the sense of the reprieved convict whose original sentence is suddenly reviewed a second time and confirmed. With a sort of frozen desperation he watched Millicent's face. Then, quietly, Milly spoke. To the maid she said: “ No, *I'll* pour it,” and took the bottle. Slowly, she rose and faced them, icy, aloof, pale with the pallor of resolution and high purpose.

“ You were asked here tonight,” she said, “ to begin a new scheme of things for

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Oakmont. Henry and I decided that the time had come to recognize a new social grouping. I was going to propose that we form a sort of informal little club and call it, for the fun of the thing, 'The Six Best Cellars.' I don't believe there's any doubt that the six best cellars in Oakmont are represented here."

There were half-smiles and nods at this — Jordan alone failed to nod or smile. Millie-
cent shook her head almost sadly as she went on, while Henry's eyes hung on hers.

"I confess that until a few moments ago I was just a little proud of having one of those cellars. I thought it was pretty smart and clever of us to get the best of the law, and to go right on drinking, just as if nothing had happened. If — if things had gone as they promised to go I'd probably still feel that way about it. But I've had my eyes opened."

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storm of expostulation broke around her, its backwash lapping at Henry, dumb and reverent at his end of the oval. They were all captivated by the abandoned idea of the Six Best Cellars; even Argentina Sturtevant Jordan, visualizing from his chilly social eminence the bins and cupboards of the promoted plebs, fought valiantly for the forsaken dream. Tommy Blair and his wife were enthusiasts from the instant the Jordan attitude was evident. As for the Tiffanys and Hammonds, it was wholly obvious that the prospect of inclusion in a re-constituted Six attracted them as strongly as the prospect of the demonetization of their social currency repelled them.

Henry took no part in the debate. He merely shook his head, and waved a submissive reverential hand at his wife. As for Milly, she was open to conviction, but unconvincible. Once was quite enough. It

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had never happened before, to be sure. It might never happen again, she admitted. But she felt that the whole thing was wrong; the whole scheme of hoodwinking the law, of rivalling one another in the lavishness and prodigality of their entertainment was hateful.

Quite suddenly there was a lull. Then McIvor Tiffany, with a gentleness foreign to him, nodded at Millicent.

“I can understand how you feel, Mrs. Carpenter. Don’t blame you a bit. Don’t agree with you, but I can respect honest opinions in others when I bump into ‘em. You’ve got to do what you feel’s the right thing.”

To Henry’s amazement, Mrs. Blair echoed his sentiments. “That’s right, Milly — you stick right to your principles. Bully for you.”

They finished the dinner with Milly the

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centre of converging approval. In the living-room, later, Henry had a revelation which put a new face on the situation.

“I say, Henry, old man! Listen—you’ll be getting rid of your stock, if Milly sticks to this notion.” Tommy Blair edged close to him. “Give me a whack at it first, won’t you?”

“I—I’ll have to talk to Milly,” parried Henry dazedly. “She’s running this. Personally, I don’t feel satisfied—”

He caught Milly’s eye with a glint of such delighted approval in it that he persevered.

“I’m not saying she’s wrong, but I’m a whole lot away from convinced she’s right,” he continued soberly. “I’ll have to talk it over with her before I decide a thing.”

Within half an hour he made the same answer to each of the other four men. The party broke up early, Daisy clucking sleep-

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ily as she was led out of the side door to the Jordan limousine. The conspirators faced each other.

"Milly, you're the whole eight wonders of the world!"

"I don't know what you mean," said Milly, evading his out-stretched arms. "I'm simply furious with shame, Henry. Daisy Jordan was ill—call it anything you like; but I know what you'd call it if she'd been a washerwoman—you'd say she was intoxicated—and I made her! Mrs. Teak's been right, all along; so's your Aunt Virginia. I've always laughed at the idea that a few drinks would do any harm. But I shan't ever forget tonight. Never!"

Henry surveyed her dubiously. The voice was the voice of Esau, but the hair was Jacob's. And he was fairly well acquainted with Milly.

"It certainly lets us out, all right," he

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said comfortably. "I was simply petrified when Hammond wouldn't more than taste his cocktail. He'd have spotted that awful mixture in a—"

"It doesn't matter in the least." Milly was loftily disdainful. "I'm not interested in Mr. Hammond's opinion of my entertainment. But I *do* owe Mrs. Teak an apology. I was frightfully snippy the last time she tried to argue with me. I—yes, I'll call there tomorrow and tell her . . . no, she'll hear about it, fast enough. It's better the other way."

Henry wrinkled his forehead. This was in the fourth dimension. But he gathered a little illumination as his wife proceeded.

"After all, I'm not so sure that we fit with fast people anyway. I'm not sure they're our sort. It may be that we belong with people like the Teaks. They like us, too. They always did."

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Henry had a sudden vision of Milly and himself as intimates of Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Teak. Viewed as a diversion it wasn't exciting, but there was undeniably a thrill connected with it. In their way the Teaks were infinitely more exclusive than the A. Sturtevant Jordans. Henry had a swift, distant picture of himself as a vestryman, a member of the Town Commission, a figure of weight and import. That helps, even in the bond business.

"Yes," he agreed, discreetly. "It's lucky this happened — in one sense."

Millicent nodded. "No matter how much they've got, it's bound to give out some time — sooner than they think. And then where will they be? The Six Best Cellars? Why, all but the very best of the six will be as empty as the Teaks' in a year or less."

She brightened. "I thought it would be

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rather convincing when we throw out all those empty bottles—”

Henry beamed. “I said you were a wonder,” he began, with renewed enthusiasm. “Let’s do it right away.”

“No,” ruled Milly. “We mustn’t be in too much of a hurry to do *anything*. It seems to me we’d better think it over very carefully, and consider all sides of the question before we do anything drastic.”

There was a silence, during which Henry contemplated her inquiringly.

“I never did like the idea of burning my bridges,” said Milly, cryptically. “Did you put out the lights in the back hall, Henry?”

Within the week, Henry had experienced most of the emotions of the congressman whose ballot will decide a weighty issue which is personally immaterial to him. He

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was the centre of a struggle, the means and trophy of victory, and he didn't care which way he went. But Millicent did.

Argentina S. Jordan, approving Milly's decision solemnly, was the first to renew, with elaborate carelessness, his offer to relieve Henry of his wet goods; and the offer was repeated with varying degrees of urgency, by all the recent guests and by an astonishing number of other citizens of Oakmont, including even the outraged Holsappel and Harris.

Henry observed, however, that these overtures revealed an underlying note of patronage. He heard, through Milly, that her idea of the Six Best Cellars had been enthusiastically adopted by the unregenerate, with five charter members and a frantic competition to decide the sixth. He felt, regretfully sometimes and then again not regretfully at all, that he and Milly were

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already regarded as out of it. Indeed, now that the story had spread, the Carpenters were considered almost as modern martyrs to a goodly cause. Already Oliver P. Teak treated Henry with the irritating proprietorship of the elect toward the newest plucked brand from the burning. The approval of Doctor Devine, the most influential of the local clergymen, was so undiplomatically expressed that it was hard for Henry to endure it,—especially with Ed Hammond within easy ear-shot.

Millicent was deeply thoughtful. She still refused, in spite of her previous declaration, to commit herself definitely. She was firm on the subject of serving alcohol under her roof, but as to the disposition of her stock, there was no decision.

Meanwhile, Henry perceived, she was being enthusiastically rushed by every woman who could possibly claim to know her well

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enough. They were both entertained — very, very temperately, and just by themselves — by the Jordans, the Blairs and the McAllisters; they were also the guests of honour at an imposing dinner given by Mrs. Oliver P. Teak, at which the conversation dwelt steadily on the absorbing question of law-enforcement.

Millicent plainly wavered. She intended to waver plainly and she did. "I've not fully made up my mind," she told Mrs. Teak, sweetly. "It's a radical change from everything I've been used to, you know. But I've decided on one thing: *if* we make up our minds to have no more intoxicating beverages on our table, we shan't sell what we've laid in. That would be just as bad as using it up ourselves. I'm ashamed to say what it cost, but, if we decide to we'll destroy it — every drop of it."

Even Mrs. Teak, who had heard the self-

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propagating rumours of the Carpenter supply, was overwhelmed. To destroy thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of precious poison, merely for the sake of principle! It was magnificent. She played a card which she had been holding in reserve. There would presently be a vacancy on the Board of Governors of the Oakmont Women's Club. Mrs. Teak was reasonably sure that Mrs. Carpenter would make an admirable governess, that is . . .

Milly was suitably charmed, without being too enthusiastic.

When this newest rumour had percolated, the thirsty ones, considering the tragedy of a wholesale wrecking of the Carpenter cellar, no longer competed for the chance of buying Henry's stock. They united in the endeavour to draw the Carpenters back into the fold. There was no question, now, of choosing the Sixth Best Cellar. The Car-

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penters were inevitably, unanimously, the ideal candidates for the disputed place, and Milly, under a concentrated fire of expostulation, displayed a gentle softness of inconviction against which entreaty and argument blunted their edges in vain!

On the other side the efforts redoubled, too. The Teaks called formally to urge renunciation as a civic duty. Milly's governorship was mentioned as an established fact; Oliver P. spoke meaningfully to Henry of the coming Town elections, the new blood needed in the new Commission, the strength of character required of men in positions of public trust. A providential affair of influenza leading to an unexpected vacancy in the vestry, the Reverend Charles Devine visited Henry with impressive circumlocutions which Millicent promptly brushed aside.

“Let’s be frank, Doctor,” she said engagingly. “If you mean that you want

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Henry in the vestry, won't you please say so?"

The rector wriggled. "I — it is scarcely in that definite form, as yet," he said, uncomfortably. "The matter — er — hinges, I may say, on circumstances — that is —"

"You mean that if we take a stand for Prohibition, or something like that, you'll elect Henry?" Millicent was disarmingly blunt. Doctor Devine wriggled again, coughed, stammered, and capitulated.

"Yes," he said, finally, "in the last analysis — it practically comes to that."

Milly's glance moved sidewise to Henry. A vestryman at Saint Adolphus'; a member of the Town Commission; the firm allegiance of the Teaks and their retinue; governess of the Women's Club; a position unassailable, solid, massive . . .

The Reverend Doctor Devine groped for

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self-justification. He had made a statement which might be misconstrued.

“I should explain that it is more than a question of temperance,” he said, uncomfortably. “You know, I think, that my personal view of this great national question has been — er — tolerant. The present crisis goes much deeper, if I may say so. It is basic, vital, fundamental.” The roll of the useful words on his tongue gave him fresh sonority. “Wisely or foolishly a law has been made forbidding the use of, and traffic in, spiritous liquors. The poor, by their very poverty, are debarred from breaking this law. The rich are able, financially and physically, to break it at their pleasure. Already we have an impossible scheme of rivalry in illegality; the mutterings of discontent among the — er — lower classes are distinctly to be heard. The spectacle of

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men and women who should be powers for good in their community engaged in eager strivings to snap their fingers at the law is — er — unedifying, if I may use the word. You follow me, my dear Mr. Carpenter?"

"Oh, absolutely, Doctor." Henry nodded, his eye searching Milly's for guidance. The reverend gentleman beamed, shook him by the hand.

"Then I see that you must have privately decided on the fine course, the wise course, the noble course!" He shook hands again. "I was sure you would come to it in the end. I feel, now, that I may express myself more forcibly than would, perhaps, have been politic if you were not of my opinion in the matter. Mrs. Carpenter, I feel that a man who would evade the law by hoarding strong drink, under the present conditions, would be irresponsible in any position of trust, would be unworthy of

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even the confidence which is said to exist between thieves. It would be . . . ”

Henry lost the rest of the sentence as the maid appeared in the doorway with a note. He moved toward her and took it. It was from Miss Jasper. Henry had a pang of apprehension. If rumour had reached her!

He mumbled an unheard apology to Milly and the rector and tore the envelope.

“ *My dear Henry:*

I am ashamed to trouble you again . . . ”

Henry caught the rector’s appeal to his masculine judgment:

“ You agree with me, I am sure, Mr. Carpenter, that there is no essential distinction between cheating the law and, er — for the sake of illustration — and cheating at cards? ”

“ Oh, absolutely, Doctor.” Henry lowered his glance to the letter.

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“ If there were any other Person to whom I could turn, with Certainty that my Confidence would be respected, I should refrain from appealing to you at this time. But there is no One. In clearing out the Rest of the Store Room in the Cellar this Morning, a Task from which my Illness and Weakness afterwards prevented me until now, Susan and I discovered that my misguided Brother was even more reprehensible in his Conduct than I had believed.”

Again Henry agreed absently with the rector and turned a page. Then, to Milly’s amazement, he lowered the letter and took sharp issue with the excellent Dr. Devine.

“ On second thought, I don’t know that I altogether agree with you, Doctor. You make a very convincing argument, but there’s another side—a very important side, and I haven’t fully decided, as yet, which is the right one. I’ll have to think

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it over with Mrs. Carpenter before we do anything definite."

Adding offence to offence, he cut short the Doctor's flurry of debate, and excused himself. Milly, staring after him, presently heard his voice at the telephone.

"This you, Hammond? Hello, Ed — Yes — No, but look here, I wonder whether I could borrow that Ford station wagon of yours for an hour or so . . . no, tonight . . . right now . . . No, I don't need any help. I'll drive it myself. All right? . . . Thanks . . . I'll be right over, then."

When the rector, puzzled and sorely tempted to be angry, had taken his departure, Milly found the note which Henry, fleeing as soon as he had hung up the receiver, had carelessly left on the telephone stand. The final paragraph interested her.

"In addition to the eight Boxes you took away with you, on the Earlier Occasion, we

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have discovered in the other Side of the Closet twenty-two more, exactly like the others, except that these are fastened shut with Iron Strips nailed around each End, so that we have been unable to open them. As you know, it is more important than ever that this dreadful Secret should be removed without reaching the Knowledge of any one, and I can only beg of you to come, with a Conveyance of suitable Size, as soon as possible, and *after Dark*.

“Affectionately yours,
“VIRGINIA JASPER.”

Millicent studied the note soberly. Her face assumed, by easy gradations, the meditative, transfigured expression which she wore when she was planning a dinner, or something vastly more momentous.

Six Best Cellars? Hardly now. One best, and five, unspeakably inferior . . .

THE END





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